

**TO:** Representative Amanda Price  
**FROM:** B. Patten, Policy & Research Manager, Excellent Schools Detroit  
**RE:** HB 4822 Grade Level Reading Position and Testimony  
**DATE:** September 8, 2015

**Executive Summary**

*Stance:* Support with changes recommended below.

*Strengths:*

1. Formative assessments three times per year in grades K-3 (§ 1280F.2).
2. Literacy coaches in all elementary schools and high quality professional development (§ 1280F.2).

*Weaknesses:*

1. Insufficient appropriations dedicated to early literacy, coaching, and professional development.
2. Power granted to a grade 3 reading teacher to determine whether a child may receive non-reading subject instruction in a grade 4 classroom.

*Recommended Change:*

1. Target dedicated early literacy funding to support legislative requirements of literacy coach employment, formative assessment use, and high quality professional development provision as well as professional development and support for early learning programs beyond GSRP.

**Evaluative Evidence and Policy Implementation**

The purpose of HB 4822 is "to help ensure that more pupils will achieve a score of at least proficient in English Language Arts on the grade 3 state assessment." This memo assesses the ability of HB 4822 to fulfill this purpose and no other.

Evidence from academic evaluations of other U.S. social promotion policies indicates that third grade retention of children reading below grade level may be associated with improved student academic achievement but no change in likelihood of high school graduation.<sup>1,2,3,4</sup> The mechanism for improved academic

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<sup>1</sup> Schwerdt, G. & West, M. R. 2013. The Effects of Test-based Retention on Student Outcomes over Time: Regression Discontinuity Evidence from Florida. Program on Education Policy and Governance Working Papers Series.

<sup>2</sup> Jacob, B.A. & Lefgren, L. 2004. Remedial Education and Student Achievement: A Regression-Discontinuity Analysis. *The Review of Economics and Statistics*, 86(1): 226–244.

<sup>3</sup> Schwerdt, G., West, M. R. & Winters, M.A. 2015. The Effects of Test-based Retention on Student Outcomes over Time: Regression Discontinuity Evidence from Florida. NBER Working Paper 21509.

<sup>4</sup> Jacob, B.A. & Lefgren, L. 2009. The Effect of Grade Retention on High School Completion. *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*.1(3): 33-58.

achievement is grade retention itself and the associated academic interventions. As retention in later grades can be detrimental for students and since many students in other states retained in third grade would otherwise have been retained later on, a third grade retention policy may be beneficial for such students. Such policies, however, rely on provision of substantial, targeted resources that require additional targeted appropriations.

Several loopholes and unintended consequences may temper or undermine the effectiveness of HB 4822.<sup>5</sup>

- Requirements in HB 4822 for diagnostic assessments, academic interventions and support, and professional development are not sufficiently supported by FY16 State School Aid Act allocations.
- § 1280F(5)(C) grants undue power to the grade 3 reading teacher by allowing him or her to determine whether a student is proficient in other grade 3 subjects.
- §1280F(5)(A)(i-iii) artificially raises the performance bar from less than "1 full grade level behind" to "a grade 3 reading level" between first and subsequent testing and eliminates any leniency previously granted.

As Martin R. West, Harvard professor and evaluator of Florida's retention policy explains, test-based promotion policies are most successful "if they are accompanied by specific requirements that students be provided with additional, research-based instruction in reading and adequate funding to implement those requirements."<sup>6</sup> Legislating supports designed to remediate and intervene with vulnerable students will be most effective (and most cost effective) when funding permits both provision of basic education and additional support of the most vulnerable students.

### Recommendations

We cannot wait until a child is behind to intervene. Some of the provisions in HB 4822 take this approach. The use of formative assessments three times per year (as mentioned in § 1280F.2) allows teachers to continually adjust and differentiate their instruction to their students' specific needs. The use of literacy coaches in all elementary schools (also in § 1280F.2) and high quality professional

<sup>5</sup> This catalogue of concerns ignores those that do not directly align with the purpose of HB 4822. Therefore, the analysis does not consider the dangers of raising the stakes of standardized testing or the deprivatization of social and emotional learning and maturity associated with higher stakes testing.

<sup>6</sup> Chiles, Nick. 2015. "As Mississippi Delivers Bad News to 5,600 Third Graders, Stressed-Out Parents Say There Must Be A Better Way." The Hechinger Report.

**Thursday, September 10, 2015**

Chairwoman Price and Committee Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. I would like first to applaud the efforts of lawmakers on the Education Committee for prioritizing third grade reading and its connection to long term outcomes for Michigan's children. And second, with the academic interests of Michigan's students in mind, I urge you to consider the application of funding allocations for House Bill 4822. This bill, if properly supported, could improve student reading proficiency across the state and avoid drastic measures, such as retention, in later grades.

Excellent Schools Detroit was founded in 2010 to ensure an excellent education for every Detroit child from cradle to career. We work to provide credible, accessible, actionable information; to align stakeholders in work that improves the overall system; to lead the public conversation about high-quality education; to support good ideas; and to advocate for local and state policy change. Our K-12 and Early Learner Scorecards provide parents, community members, and policymakers with a full picture of school quality in Detroit, and our early learning coaching, credentialing, and administrative programs work to expand and improve Detroit's supply of high quality early educators.

In this role, and as a member of the national Campaign for Grade Level Reading, we speak to early childhood educators and lower elementary school teachers who see the achievement gap develop as early as 18 months of age and widen through third grade and beyond. For this reason, we are encouraged by the presence in House Bill 4822 of language requiring the use of diagnostic and formative assessments, the employment of literacy coaches in all districts or public school academies, and the use of tailored professional development for teachers. However, we are concerned that the financial support allocated to Early Learning Initiatives and At Risk Pupils is not sufficient to tailor intervention to our most vulnerable students and to prevent large-scale third grade retention following the passage of this bill.

House Bill 4822 is designed so that third grade retention is used as a last resort. As Martin R. West, Harvard professor and evaluator of Florida's retention policy explains, test-based promotion policies are most successful "if they are accompanied by specific requirements that students be provided with additional,

research-based instruction in reading and adequate funding to implement those requirements.”<sup>7</sup> Michigan’s House Bill 4822 provides for additional instruction, but we are concerned that it does not provide adequate, dedicated funding to implement all of the new interventions included.

To follow Florida’s lead and increase third grade reading proficiency, Michigan should allocate additional, dedicated early literacy funding to support the implementation of new interventions for our state’s most vulnerable students. House Bill 4822 should be associated with funding allocations for GSRP through grade 3 commensurate with the additional assessment, intervention, support, and professional development requirements delineated in the bill. This should be in excess of current At Risk funds (none of which must be used for early learning initiatives) and Early Learning Initiatives funds (not all of which will be distributed directly to districts). Further, House Bill 4822 should empower local education leaders to use data and context to ensure that funds are allocated wisely to the students in their area who need them most.

Retaining additional third grade students will cost the state in additional foundation allowance expenditures. However, investing in student success through early intervention and support prior to third grade will pay dividends in the future as fewer students are retained and students realize greater long-term outcomes.

Thank you for your time.

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<sup>7</sup> Chiles, Nick. 2015. “As Mississippi Delivers Bad News to 5,600 Third Graders, Stressed-Out Parents Say There Must Be A Better Way.” The Hechinger Report.

development helps teachers to improve their practice in areas most critical to their specific students and provides students (especially those who are struggling academically) with much-needed small-group or one-on-one instruction.

To create proposed legislation that serves Michigan's children and works to fulfil the purpose written in § 1280F(1), HB 4822 should be associated with funding allocations for GSRP through grade 3 commensurate with the additional assessment, intervention, support, and professional development requirements delineated in HB 4822. This should involve targeted allocation of the \$70 million (a 22% increase) in At Risk funds (none of which must be used for early learning initiatives) and \$24 million in Early Learning Initiatives funds (not all of which will be distributed directly to districts).

In addition, those states that have successfully implemented third grade reading legislation have also passed accompanying legislation supporting early intervention. Possibilities for Michigan include:

- Incorporating GSRP into Michigan's per pupil foundation allowance formula, expanding early literacy instruction in GSRP, and providing additional, targeted GSRP seats such that GSRP and Head Start wait lists are eliminated.
- Using policy to ensure that all kindergarten classrooms in Michigan are full-day and that all children of qualifying age are enrolled in kindergarten.

